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AUTHOR Holt, Mara; Viola, Tony; Pruitt, John; Rankin, Mark
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ABSTRACT

This paper presents a discussion examining personal revelations discovered through peer critique and teacher response. It begins by discussing the issue of dealing with alien terms and specialized jargon in academic papers, through the example of one instructor's different treatment of two student papers based on the instructor's familiarity with the topic. It then discusses the tension in the writing process between audience exclusion resulting from jargon and exclusion resulting from a reader's own prejudice (homophobia). It continues by explaining how instructors might evaluate papers on subjects unfamiliar to them, stating that teachers should avoid leniency on mainstream papers and should be aware of placing higher standards on student papers dealing with topics unfamiliar to the instructor. It concludes that the difference between exclusive jargon and exclusive subject position matters and must be negotiated somehow. (EF)

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Extending Ourselves: A Conversation About Audience and Prejudice in Evaluating Writing.

by
Mara Holt, Tony Viola, John Pruitt, and Mark Rankin

Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (52nd, Denver, Colorado, March 14-17, 2001)

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Extending Ourselves:

A Conversation About Audience and Prejudice in Evaluating Writing

Mara Speaks:

I'm Mara Holt, and I teach rhetoric and literature courses at Ohio University. I'm presenting today with 3 former students. We'd like to continue a conversation we started in the fall of 1999, and then invite you to join us. John Pruitt, a Ph.D. student in 18th century literature, Tony Viola, a Ph.D. student in creative writing, and Mark Rankin, an M.A. student in literature were in my teacher-training class at Ohio University. Just to give you a sense of the setting, our building was being renovated around us, which meant 20 new, disoriented TA's with no working phones, offices, or computers in the building for most of the quarter:-).

We were using John Trimbur's textbook *The Call to Write*, which is a real-world genre-based text, rhetorically charged, and politically left, but subtle about it. I assigned new TAs the same assignments they were asking their first-year composition students to write; we were working from a common syllabus. Students wrote a review, a memoir, a commentary, a letter, and a series of peer critiques, for which they took home each other's papers and went beyond paraphrase and suggestions for improvement to intellectual engagement with the issues in each other's papers.

What unfolded—is still unfolding—in the process of peer critiques and teacher-response was a series of small revelations about homophobia, class bias, sexism, opportunism, power, and intimacy. Today we want to interrupt that process to share some of it with you. What we present to you is still in process, resists closure, and we're okay with that.

I'll frame this presentation by describing how this conversation got started from my perspective. Mark, Tony, and John will intersperse with their perspectives, and then we'll ask

you to join.

How it started. John wrote a review of gay porn director Bruce LaBruce's published memoir, *The Reluctant Pornographer*, and Tony wrote a review of the 1999 Mets season. In my evaluation of their papers I applied the questions "Is the subject defined clearly? Does the review give the reader enough details and background information to understand the reviewer's evaluation?" as part of my criteria. At this point my response to each of their papers differed as follows:

> **Review Evaluation: John Pruitt**
>
> I'd have to say no, not for this reader, anyway. It didn't bother me terribly, though, because I sensed that your intended audience is one more familiar with gay political movements and porn styles than I am. Nevertheless, I'd like to have a better sense of just what LaBruce's agenda is, or maybe that's the point: no one knows.
>
> **Review Evaluation: Tony Viola**
>
> For me, terrific details, not enough background information. But it's clear that I'm not your audience. As you say in your reflective statement, you're talking to fans. And that's okay.

I asked John to revise his paper, while I accepted Tony's without question. Unthinkingly I had submitted to the hegemony of Tony's discourse while enforcing the same hegemony against John. When I realized this, I asked Tony to come in with John and we talked about it. I asked Tony, who had already received an A on his paper, to revise.

Tony Speaks: [Wearing his NY Mets hat]

I submitted my review of the 1999 New York Mets baseball season to my instructor,

Mara Holt, and, as mentioned, received an A; however, I dismissed an end comment on my paper about the language choice and the issue of specialized audience. To see how the audience in question was clearly a sports-oriented and knowledgeable one, which I consciously structured my paper towards, consider the following excerpt from my review:

> In the Mets' bullpen there are characters such as the crafty Dennis Cook, a lefty, who can deliver a sharp slider to his counterpart southpaws. Then there's the reliable, though animated right-hander, Turk Wendell, a sort of mellow version of the Mad Hungarian, Al Hrabosky. And in the absence of injured veteran and ace-closer, John Franco, power-ball pitcher, Juan Benitez, has flourished in the Big Apple as the number 1 closer for the Metropolitans.
>
> In any given game, the '99 Mets batting line-up can boast up to seven .300+ hitters, including everyday players like Henderson, Alfonzo, Olerud, all-star catcher Mike Piazza, and Ventura, as well as utility players such as Roger Cedeno, Hamilton, and Dunston. Off the bench and in the pinch-hitting role the Mets have some power with Matt Franco and Benny Agbayani, though consistency from this position does seem to be lacking of late.

It wasn't until I talked with Mara about ideas for my next paper that she had asked to see my review again, and subsequently questioned further my target audience.

After our first meeting with John Pruitt, I came to realize that John had written a review with a select audience as well. However, he had received a lower grade than I and was asked to do extra writing to clarify the actual audience for his paper. Our topics differed. And Mara explained that since my topic was more mainstream than John's, she had let my oversight, my neglect of audience clarification, slide without penalty.

I felt I had earned the A. The situation with John, in my opinion, was between John and Mara. I wrote a good review, I thought. I didn't expect to see it published in *Good Housekeeping, Field and Stream,* or even *TV Guide.* I felt it would be appreciated in the sports section of a newspaper or in a magazine like *Sports Illustrated.* Some of the specialized terms—RBI, gold-glove winner, double-play—I felt didn't have to be explained. Regardless, I was asked to write an audience analysis and I did so spitefully, compiling a two and a half page glossary, which defined words and terms like starting pitching, utility players, and the baseball team the Braves.

> **The Mad Hungarian, Al Hrabosky**: an animated, well-noted relief pitcher, Hungarian in descent, for the St Louis Cardinals, who used to talk to his baseball glove, slam the baseball into his glove, and parade around the pitching mound.
>
> **Batting line-up**: the designated order of hitters that comprises a team's offense.
>
> **All-star catcher**: a catcher who is elected to play in the all-star game.
>
> **The Cubs**: one of 2 Chicago baseball teams.

As you can probably tell, I didn't do much research; I just went through my review, underlined problematic words and terms, defined them, handed in the glossary, and thought "that is that." I felt any issues that may be left over were between John and Mara. As I stated earlier, I already got the A. As the term continued, however, something happened to change my attitude. Mark submitted a memoir of his experience working at his father's factory. His memoir made liberal use of machine-shop vocabulary. It was at this point that Mara mentioned the possibility of our discussions leading towards a 4Cs presentation and beyond, and I thought, "Hey, all this extra work on my part could finally pay off."

We never did settle the issue of what to do with alien terms and specialized jargon in academic papers. However, the talks between all involved parties, and events that followed thereafter, evolved into my awareness of my own biases. Mara took a big step in admitting what she did involving John's and my review. So I began to wonder: have I been or could I be equally guilty of being prejudicial? Do I relate more with mainstream ideas and topics than papers involving a marginal perspective or voice?

Mara Speaks:

When I got Mark's memoir, I saw at once that it was full of machine-shop vocabulary. I asked him to deal with the audience issues and he chose to do so with footnotes. At the same time, I discussed with him the parallels among my experiences with John's review, Tony's review, and his memoir. As it turned out, Mark had critiqued John's memoir, in which John had made a flashy, ironic connection between gay sexuality and show tunes. It was clear from his critique that Mark had issues with John's assumptions.

Mark Speaks:

First, some background. A year before enrolling in Mara's class, I posted the following controversial message to an email listserve discussion group in a secondary education class:

> The issue of representing all groups in what we teach is important. Asian-Americans, African-Americans, and other ethnic groups have been excluded based on their skin color, or some other physical feature over which they have no control. And much has been done that is worth studying by scholars and intellectuals from these ethnic fields. However, I do not believe in studying gay and lesbian literature in English classes (for the most part). With a very few exceptions, I feel that this literature is not as good as all other literature. I believe

> find offensive. I can stomach them, but I don't happen to like them very much. And we all go out of our way to reassure kinds that just because some boys like ballet and some girls like softball they aren't necessarily going to end up with pink triangle stickers on their Miatas and brie in the fridge. But really, when's the last time you saw a little boy who could belt out "All I Ask of You" grow into a fascination with Yasmine Bleeth's breasts? Can you blame me for being suspicious?

Was John's paper a good memoir? I really wasn't sure. When I read it today I tell myself that it is good writing. But I still cannot fully grasp its main point—the connection between John's nephew Andy's birthday desires and John's identity. I feel excluded when I read it. I don't see the irony. At first I was offended that John's paper even suggested a link between show tunes and homosexual leanings (I have a liking for *Phantom of the Opera* myself). Both then and now, my interpretive faculties make me feel like some discarded Other, since my identity as a straight white male nearly always aligns me with mainstream discourse.

When I first read the paper I had no other recourse but to take the easy way out and tell John merely that I could not relate to it. That would work. I was off the hook from a nasty confrontation and John would understand that the likes of me just couldn't approach his writing. To John, I wrote the following response: "I feel that I am not a part of your intended audience. I happen to enjoy Broadway musicals (although not to the degree that Andy does), and am not in the least gay. I think (take it or leave it) that when you use such a stereotype as a key point in your piece, you risk alienating any who cannot identify."

I thought I was on to something. Prior to our conversations I had understood writing and teaching as a means to communicate one's beliefs and positions to others. Whether one's

> that homosexuality is a lifestyle choice, and as such, literature written by homosexuals does not deserve the same attention, in my mind, as literature written by African Americans. Reading homosexual literature is as justifiable to me as reading literature written by people who eat only cereal for breakfast, and nothing else. People choose to be homosexuals, and for this reason, their literature is not special to me.

When I wrote this, I had a bifurcated view of homosexual literature. One the one hand were works by homosexuals such as Walt Whitman and James Baldwin that are canonical and that in my mind explored a diversity of themes that merited study, including but not restricted to homosexuality. On the other hand was the overtly homosexual literature that would have included LaBruce's memoir and that I found distasteful and offensive. But oddly enough, until recently I never considered myself to be homophobic. My upbringing taught me to be "tolerant," but in reality only reinforced my own prejudice. This prejudice shaped my views of education and interpersonal interaction. My experience with this panel has caused me to reevaluate a number of these assumptions regarding the use of language, prejudice, and audience analyses in the first-year composition classroom.

It all began when I critiqued John's memoir, entitled "Show Tunes." In it, John interrogates social assumptions about homosexual identity by undercutting the link between an interest in Broadway musical lyrics and being gay. I had known that John was gay and knew that I might be uncomfortable even before I read his piece. But after reading it I found that I could not respond effectively because I was angry, frustrated, and confused. The following is a good example of John's work in which I sensed an alienating tone:

> I know the stereotype of the gay man singing show tunes is one many people

purpose was to inform, persuade, or dialogue, writing existed to impress the writer's views on a willing reader. I felt that if readers cannot "relate" it is their problem, but I was unable to include myself as a reader of John's paper in this logic. I was unconsciously privileging mainstream discourse.

John's written response condemned my critique and me along with it. He wrote that my comments "actually made [him] pity [my] students" because "[he thought I'd] punish the writers of memoirs who discuss their abortions or eating disorders or anything else [I] can't specifically relate to." His statement also noted that "[I'm] on the same level as some of [his] freshmen." When I first read these remarks I was speechless. But I now take them more seriously because I see that they accurately describe the dangerous implications of my naïveté. As a result I have been trying to define the boundaries of a new, much more vibrant sense of difference in my composition classes.

Our dialogues suggest that there is a tension in the writing process between an audience exclusion resulting from jargon (like that in mine and Tony's papers) and an exclusion resulting from a reader's own prejudice. Both interfere with the success of the writing act, and both should be approached for what they are. I believe both to stem from the same problem: an incomplete awareness of the power of difference to help individuals—both instructors and students—define themselves. Granted, the use of jargon has much to do with interest; Mara was not necessarily interested in the New York Mets, and a reader might not necessarily be interested in the subject of my memoir, a father-son relationship that blossomed in a northeast Ohio factory. If readers feel excluded because of a writer's use of jargon, they have the option to familiarize themselves with the subject matter in question. However, my crisis is more serious because it involves many

missed opportunities to appreciate, to learn about, and to understand the diversity of communal interaction and collaborative reflection.

My own memoir reveals the extent to which I had ignored the relationship between my intended audience—which I thought to include all conceivable readers—and my class-based, exclusionary language. The following excerpt from my memoir demonstrates the ways that I used this language:

> Right hand puts slitter blank[1] on lathe.[2] Left hand hits button. Lathe cycle begins, and carbide tipped tooling[3] rushes in to make contact with the blank, which now spins at 720 Rpm's. Flashes of brilliant light emanate outward as red-hot chips of metal haphazardly fly everywhere. Not able to remove my hand fast enough, one of the chips falls between my skin and glove. The smell of burning flesh meets my nostrils, and I feel the urge to rip off my glove and rid myself of the searing pain. But I cannot, because the cycle[4] is finished, the knife is falling.

The footnotes that I included at Mara's request are as follows:

> #1: A slitter is a 3" diameter knife with a rounded edge used to cut paper products. A slitter blank is the gray metal disc that will become a slitter.
>
> #2: A lathe is a large machine with clamps to hold metal and turn it at high speeds, allowing the metal to be cut at various angles.
>
> #3: Carbide-tipped tooling is used to cut the metal on a lathe. "Tooling" is factory jargon used to refer to small pieces of smooth edged material, shaped in squares or triangles, that attach to the lathe and cut a piece of metal. Lathe tooling must be harder than metal in order to cut it, and hence is usually made of either carbide or a clay/metal ceramic compound.

#4: A lathe cycle is the process from when the machine begins turning the part to when the part is released after having been cut.

When I wrote this I assumed that my experience was valid simply because I understood it, even as I invalidated John's experience because it was foreign. My audience would naturally feel the pain of my desire to perform on the job for my father's approval, I reasoned, because that pain had worth. I had also assumed, in the secondary education class that I mentioned earlier, that my listserve audience would respect my position because to me it demanded that respect. Not receiving the respect that I though I deserved from them as well as from John upset me.

John Speaks:

As a gay writer reviewing the memoirs of a gay porn director, I found myself aping LaBruce's arresting style in my review; I felt obliged to cater to my subject matter by using queer language when appropriate. At the same time, I don't think I necessarily used exclusive language or language that most readers, despite their sexual orientation, could not work with. Consider this excerpt: "I'm still wondering how his avant-garde pornography involving nude winter hitch-hiking, fisting, mutilation, and a hefty gang-bang accomplishes the task of negating gay culture, and it really doesn't matter. LaBruce is definitely worthy of his artistic license and creativity, but be sure not to let him know you like it. He just might take it personally."

Any reader can decode, as Tony did on a first reading, terms associated with physical violence involved in certain sexual acts but not exclusive to the gay male population. In other words, the memoirs are open to a general readership. To enjoy these memoirs, the audience must appreciate derisive or even grotesque humor. For example, readers must be able to stomach photos with captions such as "LaBruce puts the camp back in concentration camp" and passages such as "I'm literally sitting here writing this with a cold compress plopped on top of my head in

front of Basti's tv, but I stop at one point to jerk off to a Danzig video (the one about his mother) because he is so hot, steroids and all." We know what a video is, we know what jerking off is, we know what steroids do, we might not know who Danzig is, but we still know what LaBruce is talking about, that is, sexually fantasizing and masturbating before a music video starring a grotesquely muscular man, and at the same time nursing a headache.

The interested audience for my review and most likely for LaBruce's book is not necessarily an audience interested in pornography, but rather an audience interested in twentieth century popular culture and the consumption of mass culture, such as the audience for Greil Marcus's book *Lipstick Traces*, published by Harvard in 1989. I suspect that LaBruce's primary audience was gay males. Still, when I looked at bestseller lists according to the Lambda Book Report, which is compiled with sales information supplied by bookstores with a predominately gay clientele, I saw nothing that resembled LaBruce's tone or strain. Most of those titles consisted of coming out stories and erotic fiction, which squares with LaBruce's intended audience, and others emphasized a trendy form of self-induced therapy, which suggests a completely different audience that would find LaBruce's neuroses titillating.

So when Mara and Tony and Mark and I started to talk, I initially shrank back from my role in this project. I felt uncomfortable as the gay test case. While I perceived Mara, Tony, and Mark having epiphanies about their own reading and grading practices, I'd remained unscathed. I've been reading both queer and straight texts all my life. Most of my favorite authors are straight. So I entered this project reluctantly, wary of being exploited because of my arguably malleable subject position. In a word, what did I have to gain?

However, when Mara first confessed her heterosexual privileging, I wondered aloud if I practiced it as well. I read Tony's review about the Mets baseball season, and I didn't understand

a word, but I wasn't sure if I would've given the paper back for editing because of the enigmatic language of sports slang and statistics, or if I'd also grant him the benefit of the doubt. The same stands for other reviews my students might write of, say, computer trade shows, a fall clothing line, or the latest Danielle Steele novel, despite well-constructed sentences and logical criteria. How do teachers grade reviews of events they've never attended or books they've never read or films they've never seen? Do we unconsciously grant an exclusive subject position to our students when we evaluate writings on subjects we're unfamiliar with?

I also considered the alternative. Had I revealed to Mara that I might have granted a student heterosexual privilege merely as an unconscious means of protecting her, when I would actually never do such a thing? I wasn't sure about the source of my anxiety. But then I realized that when Mara, Tony, and Mark used my writing to explore their own reading and grading practices, I felt objectified. To borrow from DuBois's "The Souls of Black Folk," I experienced "double-consciousness," a feeling of "two unreconciled strivings" or "two warring ideals," "the sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others." As our conversations continued, I began to review the concept of audience that positions instructors and students with dramatically opposing ideologies, overtly or not.

I don't have a choice but to read, understand, analyze, critique, and discuss heterosexual texts, since they constitute the majority of the market and the literary canon regardless of how zealously some of use may attempt to explode and expand it. I think that the opposite should be expected as well, that, as part of current progress in cultural studies, heterosexual audiences should be able to do the same with non-heterosexual texts, or, to broaden the scope, that all audiences should open unfamiliar texts to discussion, as we've done with texts written in earlier epochs or from perspectives that challenge our own. We all know that men read and write about

novels written by women, that women do the same to texts written by men, that white instructors teach slave narratives in American literature survey courses, and that Virginia Woolf wrote her eponymous novel *Flush* from the perspective of a cocker spaniel. Because we ask our students to embrace texts from subject positions other than their own, we as teachers should do the same thing.

Mara Speaks:

At this point we'd like to switch the focus to the impact on our teaching of our now year-and-a-half long conversation.

Tony Speaks:

In a recent writing class, I received a well written memoir in one of my classes from an eighteen-year old male student from Chicago who wrote about when he was ten years old, his father brought him to his first baseball game: opening day at Wrigley Field. The student described the bright, green grass, the crisp early spring air. I could completely identify with the moment. What it conveyed was something akin to a Rockwell painting or a Hemingway father and son story. After all, it was opening day at Wrigley Field, the Cubs, hot dogs, and America's favorite past time. If the paper had under gone a few more close revisions, included more rich details, charged language, and the national anthem, I would have associated it with EB White.

The following quarter I received a memoir from another student, an eighteen-year old male from Ohio. His memoir dealt with his coming out as gay to his mother. His topic was strong, as was certain sections of his memoir. But to me, it wasn't as well written as the previously mentioned memoir. This student's descriptions seemed far-fetched and, at times, inaccurate—perhaps surreal. As a result, he received an A-, though I floated between that grade and a B+. I felt his paper needed at least one more revision before I would consider it to be an

absolute A. But I wasn't really sure, which wasn't so in the other case with the first student. I considered the Wrigley field memoir to be really good, an A paper, maybe even worthy of an A+.

I used these two examples of student memoirs as a tool in questioning my objectivity and myself. Did I really see better writing with the first example? Or did the topic affect my grading because it was more identifiable to me? I've had experiences similar to the one mentioned in the first memoir, so I could just sit back and enjoy the ride. Empathy was present, possibly affecting me on a subconscious level. And did I miss something with the second memoir? Was that particular student being creative with language, challenging boundaries, possibly putting forth images that were more original than I was accustomed to? The event is described from his perspective. Who am I to say he's wrong if I wasn't there and especially since I'm not him? I've never been in that student's shoes and never had an experience similar to his. So the most I could muster up was something on the sympathetic level. Without a frame of reference, a solid or common ground, I may have missed some successful moments. Or it could have been that the writer of the second memoir was just too creative for his own good, while the parameters of the more traditional topic of the other memoir put me at ease and allowed me to identify with what was working well in that student's writing.

I know that the parallel between my experience in Mara's course and my experience with these two student memoirs isn't completely analogous, but it emphasizes some key elements for me about being a composition instructor in the new millennium. As change occurs today, at an alarming rate for some, we, as instructors of composition, as instigators of self-expression, must confront our biases on a regular basis, grapple with them so we can understand them more and see how they affect our judgment. As a result of examining my own standards and discovering

some of my own biases, I now have a more conscious goal of avoiding leniency regarding papers or essays involving mainstream topics or even subjects that I readily identify with.

To go one step further, I don't believe it is by accident that the two students I chose to talk about above, and their subsequent memoirs, affect and possibly shape to some degree my social identity. The baseball memoir struck a personal chord with me. It may even have validated who I was: straight, white, early 30s, American male. The coming out memoir didn't quite have that effect. It in no way had the reverse effect, yet it simply may be that it put me in a place of discomfort, perhaps even threatening (on some subconscious level) my role in society as a straight white male. Or maybe this memoir just involved a perspective I was not privy to.

I have been teaching college English for four years. However, with each class it seems the stakes have gone up. Students feel more and more comfortable expressing themselves. High schools today are exposing students to group work and collaborative learning. As the world becomes more diverse, and as my students continue to explore their identities and put forth their own ideas, free from potential ridicule, scorn, or misunderstanding, to what level do I stress conformity in my students' writing? How do my personal biases dictate my pedagogy or classroom environment? Is my grappling with my own prejudice in order to tame its influence on my behavior an on-going process in my career as a teacher? The answer to that question seems to be yes.

If anything, out of this entire ordeal I learned about sports, its relationship to me, and how it can function or be perceived in and out of the classroom. I used to talk about sports regularly in my class when I was a beginning instructor to help ease the tension and anxiety. I avoid it now mainly because I learned that in my audience, my classroom, there are a number of students who

are clueless regarding the topic, and it's probable that they feel excluded as well. And that's one thing I won't tolerate in my classroom.

Mark Speaks:

Because of our ongoing discussions, I have become more aware of the connections among my prejudice, my teaching, and the audience both of my writing and of my students' writing. Nevertheless, in my last few courses I have reasoned that my students would approach my assignments with eagerness because they would of course understand my approach to be effective and valid. But many of these assignments did not give students the opportunity to explore their own voices in any meaningful way that way differed from mine. Let me provide a few examples. While planning the syllabus of my Winter 2001 first-year composition course I decided to focus on methods of argument and assign a traditional argumentative essay as the first major paper. When students handed in their work I found that two of the papers argued that Pete Rose deserved admission to the Major League Baseball Hall of Fame. Moreover, for a later assignment a student reviewed the recent Super Bowl. Certain that these writers had little awareness of the fact that their work relied heavily on a sports-oriented, audience-specific language, I immediately thought about Tony's review and pondered how my students would respond if I asked them to do an audience analysis. I did not require them to do so, but maybe I should have. Fortunately I know a bit about baseball and football, but I am certain that if I had received a memoir like John's I would have had difficulty responding to and evaluating it, especially since my response to his memoir is still relatively ambiguous. Granted, I am aware that I need to cast aside my prejudice when I analyze student writing—but how can I really judge student work if it clashes with my preconceived notions and attacks my cherished ideals? How much of my prejudice stifles students from freer expression? Likely a great deal. To what extent

does it convey to them overly simplistic views of audience? Probably to a large extent. Tragically, because my biases probably hinder me from inspiring them to their greatest potential, I consequently have difficulty helping them better learn to feel passionately about topics to which they cannot easily relate. The fact that none of my students have ever submitted papers that deal directly with gender and sexual identity strongly suggests that my teaching in some way stifles their potential for creative expression and personal exploration. I must reflect on why this is the case if I seriously hope to grow as a teacher.

Recent evidence suggests that I am still in process. A few weeks ago I used the *Autobiography of Malcolm X* to introduce my memoir assignment. I asked my students to read the first ten pages and respond to it according to a series of criteria I provided on a handout. Of twenty students, two Caucasians, a man and a woman, indicated in their responses that they felt excluded from the reading and hence could not understand whether or not it exhibited the qualities of a memoir. In her response Amanda writes: "I am not sure what to think about the reading from Malcolm X's book. [. . .] I am confused at his goal throughout his writing. [. . .] I find it difficult to relate to him." Similarly, Ryan states: "I don't think that this makes for a good memoir because I can't relate to the main point of the story [. . .]." I was startled and at a loss for words when I saw that the exclusion they felt because they could not relate paralleled my own response to John's memoir. Not knowing what else to say I wrote this as a response to each of them: "Do you have to 'relate' to appreciate the piece as a memoir?" This exchange reveals a problem in my identity as a composition instructor. I am troubled by my students' inability to fully grasp Malcolm's experience, and as Ohio University is a predominantly white institution I can see how a richer appreciation for race diversity would benefit them. However, I am even more troubled because when I try to apply this logic to my own inability to appreciate John's

piece I still cringe even though I know that I should not. The fact that my own bias may restrict my teaching disturbs me greatly. For this reason the dialogue we began last year has jeopardized my self-assurance as a successful composition instructor.

John Speaks:

Work by Saralyn Chesnut, Kristen A. Renn, and Jean H. Thoresen on queering the university curriculum and creating Gay Lesbian Bisexual Transgendered (or GLBT) courses suggests correctly, I think, that GLBT and GLBT-friendly students require a positive, safe, supportive learning environment that will allow them to explore, discuss, and critique their identities free from prejudice or threats. Still, despite their good intentions, I think that they essentialize this audience of students by assuming, albeit not surprisingly, that identity politics in the GLBT classroom will be uniformly politically correct. The primary topic in each of their articles focuses on heterosexism, not necessarily open attacks or disparaging remarks, but to a degree what Robert Rhodes terms the "politics of silencing," that is, the exclusion of GLBT materials in the classroom.

Their longing for an unproblematic audience, however, yields problems, which I discovered when I taught a course on queer film and literature last spring. Here I envisioned a group of students on the same ideological level, but there were dramatic differences and rival camps over certain issues. Out of 35 students, most were lesbians, followed by heterosexual women, gay men, heterosexual men, and finally by one transgendered student. Also out of these 35, two were well-versed in queer theory and criticism, and more than half were at least familiar with gay texts. I discovered the odd gaps on the second class meeting, when I gave a brief rundown of gay history and how literature and film fell into it. When I asked the question "What extremely famous event involving police officers and broken windows happened on June 28,

1969, at a gay bar in Greenwich Village and opened the gay liberation movement?" I didn't get an answer at all. I knew that some could've answered, but no one responded, so when I finally whispered "Stonewall," I was at least relieved to discover that many said "Oh, yeah," but then I realized that many didn't even know their own history, which saddened me, but at least it let me do my job as a teacher, so I didn't grieve for very long.

Since beginning this investigation, I've discovered that many students we might connect ideologically, as in my GLBT class, will still resist certain writings because they feel that they can't grasp them. This issue reared its ugly head most viciously during the topic of transsexuality after we read Kate Bornstein's book *Gender Outlaw*. My transgendered student greatly respected her, and many of my students were willing to learn about and explore the issue, although the prospect of gender fluidity and gender bending was a little frightening. Still, one student, a heterosexual male named Ben, said that he pitied transsexuals because they don't know what they are, which is a general position that many of my students hold. In other words, they see the world as binary, and a transgendered person apparently fits into too many slots (but this one might be my fault since we discussed *Gender Outlaw* alongside a screening of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*). It was a revelatory moment for me because, although everyone in the class was interested in the material on a political level, it reminded me of Mark's "audience alienation" comment about my memoir, the point that he couldn't empathize with the inevitable, albeit nonsensical, correlation between homosexuality and show tunes because he doesn't remotely wax queer, just as Ben argued that he lacked the means of discussing the concept of being transgendered.

In a course on Advanced Composition that I taught last fall, I screened the cult film *Sid and Nancy*, but most of my students refused to discuss the punk subculture of the 1970s and 80s

and the rhetoric of violence of a new order overtaking an existing order. It seemed that they didn't want to face it or decided that they just couldn't possibly understand it, which were remarks that they'd also made to each other in their dialogue journals. I gave them a lecture about using dismissive phrases without digging deeper or explaining them by suggesting that when they propose that something isn't normal, for example, it suggests that they're using themselves as a basis for essentialist normativity, which they must clarify because some readers will not understand what's abnormal about the punk rock movement.

At the same time, their comments influenced me to re-evaluate my choice of class materials. I turned to a unit on horror films, which many students have seen and can discuss. When my students' attention turned to other types of films, the conversation shifted to how chick flicks and sports films are ideologically very similar to horror movies, which then turned to why screenwriters create these different films if they're all basically the same and audiences watch them for the same reasons. It all led to productive and exciting discussions that everyone could partake in without feeling excluded. So, overall, I'm not suggesting that we must all teach and embrace GLBT texts. I'm suggesting that we can't force our students to empathize with and critically discuss one isolated text. Rather than leaving space for the students to deflect political or personal matters by egregiously expressing their apparent inability to grasp a text because of an awkward subject position—their own or that of the author—we must contextualize it or set it beside other texts to channel class discussion without the risk of diluting the instructor's goals or the students' stimulation.

Mara Speaks:

I have enjoyed and learned from the conversations we've been having. Our candid

discussions have affected the risks I'm willing to take in other classrooms. I think the central question for me is this: How important is it for me to challenge myself and my students to think beyond politically correct to a more nuanced understanding of the emotional baggage—Peter Elbow might say violence—that comes with learning? When is it okay to venture into that territory, and when is it better not to? CCCC has been talking about some form of this issue for years. I think of Ken Bruffee's conversation metaphor, Mary Louise Pratt's contact zones, and safe houses. Although I think it's safe to say that Tony, John, Mark, and I have found our conversations productive, even sometimes fun, I know we've all had moments of wondering how we got ourselves into this mess! I think that Tony summed it up best earlier in this talk when he referred to it as an ordeal!

Tony Speaks:

When I started the Ph.D. program at Ohio University nearly eighteen months ago I thought I was a very open-minded individual. Since then, between my experiences as a student and an instructor, I have found that hasn't been so. I still think I wrote a good review, worthy of an A, audience analysis or not. Regardless, change is constant today, consistent for the most part. I've struggled with my belief system for years and this is more apparent now that I'm in a liberal arts program. Truth is, I may have been open-minded eighteen months ago. Truth is, I'm more open-minded now. Truth is, I'll be even more so in the future.

John Speaks:

I think it's interesting that it took a text about a gay subject to precipitate events. It drives me to dig around to see if other instructors have made similar discoveries. Still, I find that we will always base our grading standards on our own familiarities. I find that I have higher standards for student papers that cover topics I know. For example, I was very critical about a

student's glowing review of the movie *Scream 3*, despite our agreement that the film was brilliant, because I find Wes Craven to be a cinematic genius, and I wanted to ensure that my student would move his readers with exhilarating language. At the same time, reviews of Adam Sandler movies get my brief passing because of my unfamiliarity with them beyond *The Wedding Singer*. I find that my ability or lack thereof to discuss specific texts may unnecessarily punish or reward my students. If we embrace our teaching, must we not only expose our students to new materials, but also take the initiative to understand and familiarize ourselves with our students' interests?

Mark Speaks:

Although I am sure that I have come a long way since my listserve posting, I have been unable to completely relinquish my homophobia. In the course of our discussions I have yet to actually get my hands on LaBruce's book, and I really don't think that I want to. I can live my life and be okay with not experiencing it, but the trouble comes when I carry this bias into my classroom. I do not know how I would respond if a student wrote on any topic that rubbed me the wrong way. I can say this because, honestly, it has never happened. I used to think that this did not matter, but our dialogue has irrevocably told me that it does. The difference between exclusive jargon and exclusive subject position matters and must be negotiated somehow. I don't know how to do it, but the issue is there.